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ABSTRACT

Reading is the key to learning. Without basic reading skills, the individual is shut out of society in many ways. Illiteracy lowers his chances of employment, limits his knowledge in politics and current events, and limits his success in school. As all of these things affect the nonreading individual, so does his lack of productivity and lack of personal fulfillment affect our society as a whole. The solution to the reading problem in achieving the goal of national functional literacy requires total community involvement--by parents, schools, businesses, radio, television, libraries, and publishing companies. By communities becoming more involved in the individual, the individual, in turn, increases his involvement in the community, thus creating a better society for all. (AI)

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AN ADDRESS

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AT

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Reading is the key to learning. Without the basic skills of reading, the individual is shut out of society in many ways. When too many are limited in their access to society, society itself has a problem.

We have millions in our society who are prevented from enjoying many of the benefits of our communities because they read poorly or not at all. The same handicap prevents them from making their contribution to society.

One child in five is not making satisfactory progress in school because of reading difficulties. Two out of five in the major cities are well below reading achievement levels expected of their grade or age. Five million young adults recently out of school face major problems of entering the work force due to reading debilities. Possibly a fourth of the work force of the country cannot readily advance to a next level job opportunity if it requires reading proficiency beyond that of their present position.

A Lou Harris poll, commissioned by the National Reading Council a few months ago, showed that eighteen million adults over age 16 would have been unable to read understandingly and respond to ten percent of the questions to be read on standard and unavoidable forms of society such as applications for a driver's license, a personal bank loan, medicaide, etc.

The hour is late for us to realize that a significant number of our children and adults are not functionally literate. That is, they do not have the minimum reading skills required to operate successfully in their daily pursuits on the job, in school or in general living in terms of the normal run of instructions, signs, warnings, labels, directions and literature they may be expected to encounter. They are not able to use their reading skill to recreate themselves pleasurably through literature. They cannot write friends or take down messages.

They cannot read the general news of the day in popular publications. They cannot seek socioeconomic advancement where reading skill is a necessary prerequisite. Such a person finds himself in a dangerous position from his reading handicap. His numbers also constitute a danger to our society.

Our educational system is hampered by the number of reading problem students. Too much time in later years must be devoted to attempting to correct the deficiency. Time that should be devoted to continued educational progress is lost. The duplication of effort within the same system is inefficient. At the five percent repeating level, the economic cost is about two billion dollars annually that should be devoted to other needs.

American business and industry carry out one of the biggest adult educational operations in the world. An enormously diverse educational program is operated within businesses. Too often basic training in reading and mathematics has to be provided. With new employee training costs running from $500 to $1,500 per new employee, reading deficiencies impose an unnecessary burden on the business and industrial community. The cost of retraining must be passed on to the consumer who thought he had once paid for the basic education aspects of such training in his school taxes. Central city businesses drawing heavily on city school products as employees are finding their talent pool substantially reduced and the needs for retraining and turnover rates among employees climbing. Reading skills need to be developed in the early school years not as a prerequisite for employment as an adult. Preschool stimulation and preparation of children and a real commitment in the early school years would not require a substantially different total cost than is now being spent by society under unrecognized labels.

The enthusiastic interest of business in the National Right to Read Effort may help the nation correct our basic approach to teaching reading and achieving universal functional literacy. Business should not be cast in the makeup role. Many businesses have an enviable record of not only conducting their own training program but also assisting in the general education needs of their communities.

Our political system presumes a literate population. The non-reading citizen must depend on television, radio, slogan posters and the advice of friends in considering candidates for political office, public issues and in understanding the political news of the day. Unable to read, he is less a citizen. His citizen right to vote is even conditioned by his literacy level.

In a world turning to technology and in our society where the unskilled jobs are rapidly dwindling away, the threat of unemployment for the nonreader is at its greatest. The potential value of a worker may be heavily overlaid by his inability to read well enough to contribute his best work. The double burden of underproduction by the individual and potential welfare roll cost to the taxpayer is bound up in the absence of reading skills in workers. It is not an exaggeration to note that the "pursuit of happiness," declared as an unalienable right in the preamble to our Constitution, may be an empty promise for some. If one cannot read well, how can he pursue his own vision of happiness? Or, can Article I of the Bill of Rights, protecting the right of free speech, freedom of the press and the right to petition, have full guarantee for a man who cannot read or reads poorly? Is not the ability to read, to have the avenue of understanding of the news of the day and society, a prerequisite to the right of free and responsible speech? It seems possible that a child, an adult, a citizen has the <u>legal</u> right to be able to read. He must be taught and he has a right to learn so fundamental a skill. He must be taught.

There are some reasons why we have gotten into this fix in reading. We now receive in schools all of the children of all of the people under compulsory education laws. Most remain until age sixteen. Such a broad spectrum of children naturally presents a range of learning to read difficulties, but the proportion we fail to help enough is far too large.

Though we know that the preschool years and the early school years are the most impressionable and that stimulation and experiences in them are critical to

later educational success, we still do not require that formal schooling starts until age six. In some states, age eight is the law. Providing kindergartens are the discretion of local school districts. If some parents do not provide the best kind of reading readiness experiences at home for preschoolers and we do not start formal schooling until some of the best learning years are past, we naturally present ourselves a harder task when we do begin. If suburban parents extend themselves to create preschool experiences for their children and enroll their children in nursery and preschools, it should not be surprising that inner city children, who are largely denied both opportunities, turn out to have substantially lower reading scores when they are taught and tested later on. It cannot be fairly claimed that suburban teachers as a group are that superior to inner city teachers. Other factors are at work.

We have steadily increased the curriculum of our schools. Every decade we add still more subject matter for what at each time seems good causc. From our earlier emphasis on the three R's we have added all manner of important studies as though our ability to do all things was without limit. Health education has been enlarged. Sex education has found a little time. Now drug education needs a share. More time about African and Asian cultures must be found. The state legislature and the State Education Department add here, and the parents insist on new instruction there. We have not lengthened the school day or the school year enough to absorb all the new curriculum. Reading time as a portion of the school day is likely worse off than it was 25 years ago.

It is also likely that our changing social mores have led to a less stable home and parental support of the school. The day when the school and the teacher were automatically right and most parents saw to it that the child did his lessons is long gone. Along with teacher accountability as a new phrase, we might well think about parent accountability and its role in the support of

learning to read. The schools have probably changed less than the home in the society as a whole. It is possible that what has been lost from the home side may have more to do with our reading dilemma than what did or did not happen at school!

Most people don't think much about teacher certification. For example, the typical citizen would presume that elementary school teachers are taught how to teach reading. Forty percent of our states make certification requirement about the ability of new teachers to teach reading. If the teacher training college doesn't have a seriously organized curriculum including the teaching of reading, the teacher may not learn to teach reading except by practicing on children when she starts to teach. When you think about that along with all the other things that a teacher is expected to teach, it is quite possible that reading can be slighted.

The mobility of our population along with the broad number of reading programs and methods used by different schools have aggravated the problem. As children are moved from school to school, often between states, they may be introduced to new methods or materials that make reading progress more difficult. Few schools can afford reading specialists to professionally diagnose reading problems and recommend appropriate procedures for transferred children.

The scene is not all dismal however. Clearly, millions of children are learning to read and very well. Why a substantial minority should not is our question. What do we seem to know with some certainty about this matter?

A well-educated teacher, equipped with materials and wanting to help children learn to read, is the best single answer to our problem. It is not possible to compensate by materials or equipment for a well-prepared teacher when it comes to reading.

We know that children with a preschool background of experiences learn to read more easily and successfully than other children. Children who are talked to, who take little trips with their parents, who have interesting materials in

their homes are better ready to learn to read. Children who know what books, magazines and newspapers are and see older people reading them have the idea already that reading is natural, pleasurable, and has value. If children have learned our oral code and can talk, they have the potential of learning our written code and should read. Equal care and effort and reinforcement must be expected.

We know that schools that provide generous reading materials help their children learn to read more easily and more pleasurably. They permit the child to capitalize on his own interests more often. A school that doesn't have a central library or a good range of attractive materials in the classroom or other media forms such as films and audio tapes, makes it more difficult for children to learn to read.

We know that no single method of teaching reading is best. If it were, it would be effective for all children in schools where a single method is universally applied, and would have been discovered by now. Different children benefit from different materials and methods at different times.

We know that social promotion of children, regardless of their reading ability, only aggravates the academic as well as social and psychological problems. Retaining them is not the simple solution either.

We know that individualizing the teaching of reading is a major help to most children. Paraprofessionals, volunteers and other students can provide this condition successfully for many children.

When adults have a personal or vocational motivation which demands that they learn to read, they make rapid progress.

A practical view of our reading dilemma suggests several actions that can logically be taken. We do not need especially new knowledge. We need to act. The actions require both the schools and society at large to move in concert to

achieve the goal of national functional literacy. What is it we should do?

- We need to require all elementary teachers in training to be taught how to teach reading. They need to know the major methods and the major materials. This is a matter of legislative action by states or directives by state education departments.
- For teachers already in schools we must provide in-service education instruction to help them acquire the essential reading teaching skills. Secondary school teachers need in-service orientation, too, to help them recognize and deal with the reading problems of their junior high and high school students.
- We need to dramatically increase the manpower devoted to the teaching of reading. Since the increase needed would be so costly even if enough teachers could be hired, a massive program to recruit, train and equip volunteer reading tutors must be undertaken. Such volunteers can make a major contribution to developing reading skills in many children. These volunteers can be prepared to work with preschoolers in homes as well as with adults of all ages.
- We need to provide stimulating at-home experiences and environment for children from ages two to six or until they go to school. Many parents could do a better job of this if they knew better what to do. The mass communication media must help us with programs and instructions to inform parents and adults in households how to create a positive reading readiness environment for young children. The television industry must reassess its moral base and concepts of public service. With this nation's literacy problem and the the role which television could play to reduce it, soap operas, game

shows and general entertainment can give way somewhere to help people who can't read learn to read. Television is probably the only communication vehicle that reaches nearly all of the locations of nonreaders of all ages. Television's potential as a teacher must be developed to justify its existence as a salesman. The publishing industry must help in creating new, cheap materials for wide distribution in this connection. New distribution potentials must be analyzed. For example, if grocery sacks or bags are one of the very few items that go into nearly every household, should there be something in or on such sacks to help teach reading?

We must concentrate on reading for each child until he has acquired a minimum satisfactory mastery of the skill. Until the reading skills are progressing satisfactorily, we must restrict the other demands on his school time. This does not mean onerous drills and badgering experiences. Rather, it calls for individualizing the teaching and tutoring and enriching the materials and skill we devote to the problem. Other subjects can be caught up somewhat later on. Reading is so basic that it must be gotten on the track first.

Boards of education, taxpayers, and school administrators must act to purchase adequate materials for every school in connection with the teaching of reading. It is poor economy to avoid the immediate tax load of a few more reading materials and later to face multiplied costs for welfare, repeat teaching time and other expenditures forced upon the public when reading skills are not learned.

Second only to a teacher well trained to teach reading, the availability of materials is most important. Materials to stimulate readiness for learning to read must become commonplace in all American households with young children. Beginning reading materials of great diversity must be made more cheaply available and national need must be reflected in their distribution. Parents in households without materials must have the materials brought them if necessary. Common items that go into reading impoverished homes must be imprinted with reading teaching help ideas (i.e., grocery sacks, detergent boxes, cereal boxes, milk cartons, soda cans, candy wrappers, etc.). Volunteer reading tutors may need to be organized on the World War II block warden basis to create a screen to locate every household where there is a preschool child who should be helped by better reading materials. Special materials to instruct adults who are willing but unable to help preschoolers must be prepared and distributed. Reading posters showing from inside vacant storefront windows and other locations in neighborhoods can begin to create the necessary reading environment and "letter and word presence" now lacking.

Television has a special burden to admit. No other medium is so available and has such an opportunity to contribute to the at-home reading support effort. "Sesame Street" so far has only lifted an edge of the blanket to reveal the good that can be done. Reading materials are also planned television programs when we are talking about teaching reading.

The crime of schools without libraries continues. Books and reading materials are the window on the world for many children--and adults. Other media cannot serve their same purpose. In the same sense that baseball cards are popular and collected and talked over and exchanged by youngsters, reading cards should be developed and popularized with a still younger set. Reading specialists can tell us what to put on them. Business has already demonstrated how to distribute

them. The combined publishing industry should generate at-cost, cheap, simple, expendable reading materials appealing to budding readers at the early stages of reading.

The publishers must, as their part of the national partnership in Right to Read rethink how to produce a very high volume and wide variety of reading materials with only one eye on the profit side of the ledger. If we teach this population to read early and well, the profit matter will correct itself later by readers who buy. No child should begin school who has never yet owned a book!

- Relaxing rigid grade level organization in schools would likely contribute to a climate that would make the variable levels of reading retardation or acceleration easier to work with. The combination of social promotions into higher grade levels without commensurate readiness to cope with the new level materials can only aggravate the student's view of himself and his skill performance. Dealing with reading within a primary grades block of three years and an upper elementary block of three years would simplify the pressures that arise from annual grade level promotions.

If schools could cope with the reading dilemma successfully, they would have done so. School faculties do not wish to appear as failures any more than a child wishes to appear a failure. The problem is not just one of greater will or a reorganization of the modes of instruction. The problem is such that the schools cannot resolve it by themselves. The schools, in fact, are not the sole cause of our literacy difficulty. The problem has its roots in the home and the early years before formal schooling begins. The problem becomes more exacerbated by what we do or don't do in the schools. Thereafter, the problem is clinched when nonreaders leave school since we provide them no easy route for learning to read when they later may have the motivation to do something about

their handicap. The problem is many headed and national in scope. It is a problem of society. It is a problem that must be resolved and it will take a decade of serious effort. Money will be required. But we have spent money and energy on many matters of lesser importance and will in the future.

The National Right to Read Effort called for by the U. S. Commissioner of Education in 1969 requires both the public and private sector interest if it is to be successful. To assure that all children leaving school in 1980 will be able to read up to their capacity is a formidable challenge in the light of the current statistics. The U. S. Office of Education has created a Right to Read office to concentrate efforts of the schools in the pursuit of the National Right to Read Effort goal.

Last summer, President Nixon appointed Mr. Walter W. Straley as national chairman of the National Reading Council. On July 31 the HEW Secretary announced the names of the citizen members of the Council. The Council was charged with becoming a catalyst to spur the nation to the attainment of national functional literacy in this decade. In particular, the Council must develop a significant partnership of the private sector with the public effort. The Council is composed of individuals from business, government, the mass communications media, the arts, education, and major national organizations. They are viewed as actively involved rather than as an advisory council. The Council created the National Reading Center as its operating arm. The Center is located at 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. in Washington, D. C. Other aspects of the responsibilities of the Council require it to provide communication among the major partners in the national effort and to coordinate and focus the effort. The Council through the Center must report periodically to the President through the HEW Secretary on the progress the nation is making toward functional literacy.

The National Reading Center is organized on a functional basis to provide catalytic and liaison personnel to work in the major partnership areas of business and industry, the mass media, volunteers, educational organizations, and

informational services. The somewhat modest staff of about twenty-five will be supplemented by others on leave, on sabbatical, on loan, volunteers and professionals who desire to devote some time to active involvement with this national effort.

An early major effort of the Council is already under way. The Council has endorsed the concept of the nation's need for a Ten Million Volunteer Reading Tutor Plan. This TMT operation is aimed at recruiting, training and placing millions of volunteers over the next decade to increase the manpower pool directed to individualizing the teaching of reading. A five-school initial plan as a demonstration is being established in Washington, D. C. and several hundred tutors will receive special training in the next few months. Tutoring, along with other activities of the Center, is designed to be exportable and translatable to all parts of the nation. Work is under way with the State of Iowa to apply the tutor training program on a state-wide basis. Volunteer tutors are to be trained to help in homes of preschool-age children, with dropouts, with working adults and the aged, i.e., with anyone who wants or needs to read or read better.

The National Right to Read Effort, and especially the work of the National Reading Council and the Center, is based on a traditional principle of American behavior. In earlier times and in rural America the community and neighborly "barnraising" was a cooperative effort by many to overcome a disaster that had befallen a fellow citizen. When a man's barn had burned or was blown down, his survival and that of his family was threatened. His neighbors turned out to raise a new barn for him in a spirit of friendship and recognizing the economic and personal danger in which he was placed. The community was also injured if the loss was permitted to go uncorrected. It was a hard-working but festive affair. The completing of the deed was a cause for celebration by all who took part. Many helped in different ways and the barn got raised. Our children and fellow citizens who have had the disaster of being nonreaders visited upon them

need us all to share in a "reading barn raising." They are threatened. Their economic and social survival are threatened. They are unable to complete the job themselves. Many tasks are there for us to do. The Council invites you to lend your talent and time to help in this barnraising that will help set the character of this nation for the rest of this century.